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Ties to Somocistas Choke U.S. Policy Goals

By FRANK del OLMO

GUATEMALA CITY—It was like a scene from one of those war movies out of Ronald Reagan's old Hollywood.

It unfolded on a dark, humid day, on a rubble-strewn street in a city devastated by aerial bombardment. Dozens of weary people were picking through what was left of their homes and businesses in a light rain, trying to salvage what they could. Then, at the end of the street, a jeep filled with heavily armed soldiers turned the corner and began to drive slowly down the block.

The people on the street suddenly vanished, some ducking into the damaged buildings, others down alleyways. Within seconds the street was silent and empty—except for the slow-moving jeep and its grim-faced occupants—a testament to what the townspeople felt toward the army that occupied their city.

It happened in September, 1979, in Leon, a medium-sized city in Nicaragua, one of several that had been captured by rebel forces early in the civil war to overthrow Anastasio Somoza.

At the time, the dictator's National Guard still had the firepower, if not the popular support, to hold its own against the rebels. Government troops had recaptured Leon after almost a week of fighting, driving out guerrillas of the Sandinista National Liberation Front—and many of the city's young men and women who had joined them.

I was one of several reporters who followed the guardsmen into Leon, and I recorded the townspeoples' stories of indiscriminate rocketing and strafing by government planes and the summary execution of suspected rebel sympathizers.

I interviewed a woman whose teen-age son had been dragged from home and shot on the street outside the day before. "They are animals," she said in a cold fury. "They shot my son and other boys here, and would kill us all if they got a chance."

The memory of that has remained with me. Perhaps if President Reagan and his advisers on Latin America had been in Leon, they might better understand the hatred that most Nicaraguans have for the guardsmen who defended the Somoza regime against a popular rebellion.

A few thousand of those men, now known as Somocistas, are now trying to overthrow the revolutionary government that replaced Somoza. They operate from secret bases in neighboring Honduras, and reportedly receive some covert help—mostly financial—from the Central Intelligence Agency. U.S. officials privately acknowledge that some not-so-covert operations are being carried out against the Nicaraguan government with Reagan's knowledge and permission, but they insist that these operations are intended to harass the Sandinista government, not overthrow it.

Whatever their purpose, these actions overlook a fundamental fact: As unpopular as the Sandinista government has become inside Nicaragua, it is nowhere near as hated as the Somocistas were, and still are.

There is a forceful man in Costa Rica, Eden Pastora, who would explain this to Reagan if he could. But he avoids U.S. contact because he doesn't want his criticism of the Sandinistas to be misinterpreted as siding the hated Somocistas.

Popularly known as Commander Zero, Pastora was a key military leader, and the biggest hero, of the rebellion that overthrew Somoza. One of his most significant victories was a spectacular commando raid on the National Congress that sparked the brief uprising in the late summer of 1979.

The Reagan Administration has committed a "mortal error" by helping the ex-guardsmen, Pastora said in a recent interview in his office on a hilltop overlooking Costa Rica's capital, San Jose.

"The problem of the National Guard is not just political, it's psychological," Pastora said. "The people of Nicaragua remember the Guard for murder, torture and the bombardment of cities . . . . The memory makes peoples' hair stand on end. The very words *(La Guardia)* are a curse."

Pastora left Nicaragua almost two years ago, disillusioned with the dogmatic Marxism and pro-Soviet line that the Sandinista government was taking. He is now working against them, helping to organize an opposition alliance that he says represents the "true" Sandinistas—Nicaraguan nationalists and democrats, not Soviet puppets.

Before he left Nicaragua, Pastora was the country's deputy defense minister; he oversaw the training of 60,000 Nicaraguan citizens as a national militia. He now estimates the number of militia at 100,000, and says with some pride that, "combined with Nicaragua's regular army and its reserve forces, they would be a formidable foe for any invasion."

Reagan's assistance of the Somocistas only gives "the directorate" (Pastora's term for the Sandinista leaders who now control the government) something to unite the people against, Pastora said. He believes that the new Nicaraguan Democratic Alliance, which he helps lead, is a "third force" that the United States and other democratic governments should support, instead of the Somocistas, against the radical government in Managua. He is helping to organize opposition among groups such as labor unions inside Nicaragua. He insists that this internal opposition will eventually overthrow the Sandinista government, but that first the external threat from the Somocistas must be eliminated.

Some critics of Pastora, both in the United States and in Latin America, dismiss him as a dreamer. He is a courageous man, to be sure, but certainly not a skilled or pragmatic politician. Some U.S. officials say, for example, that Pastora doesn't understand the geopolitical realities that require the CIA to support the Somocistas. The harassment of cross-border raids is intended to keep the Sandinistas from supplying leftist rebels in El Salvador, where the United States is trying to prop up a military-civilian government and prevent "another Nicaragua" or, even worse, "another Cuba."

Maybe Pastora is an idealist. But some of what he says makes sense—like this: "The (Sandinista) directorate has not committed the acts of genocide that the Guard committed. There have been errors. There has been torture and a lack of freedom. But they have not reached, in three years, the level of repression reached by the Guard by September, 1979.

As one who witnessed that repression, I know that Pastora is right on that one—and that Reagan and his political scriptwriters are wrong.

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